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ABSTRACT

The author reviews trends in South African special education for learning disabled (LD) students and describes the approach used at a special school for LD students. (CL)

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LATEST TRENDS ON SPECIAL EDUCATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA. By Mrs. Edna Freinkel.

PRESENTED TO THE FIRST WORLD CONGRESS ON FUTURE SPECIAL EDUCATION ON THE 26TH JUNE, 1978.

SPONSORED BY COUNCIL FOR EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN, HELD AT STIRLING UNIVERSITY, SCOTLAND.

Mr. Chairperson, distinguished guests:

It is a profound privilege for me to be addressing you at this exciting Congress. It is my earnest prayer that ALL education should be special, and that ALL children be considered exceptional. For too frequently, negative education makes the ordinary child exceptional, exceptionally deviant, learning disabled or apparently mentally retarded, while exceptional education for ALL children can indeed help to make every child the "joy of its Creator", if not in the academic field, then in non-academic pursuits. With this in mind, I sent the following questionnaire to all universities, teachers' training colleges, education departments, as well as to the Human Sciences Research Council and the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research in South Africa.:

1. How does your department define special education?
2. Do children suffering from learning disabilities fall under the category?
3. How does your departments administration cover these problems?
4. What training is provided for teachers of children requiring special education?
5. Apart from practical teaching of children in need of special education what other disciplines are involved at schools, clinics etc.
6. Is there any special time allocated to particular problems such as reading and remedial reading?

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7. i) What provision is made for enabling children in need of special education to socialise:
   a) while under your jurisdiction?
   b) after they have left school?
   ii) Is there any attempt made to educate them in:
   a) human relations
   b) the development of self-confidence
   c) general happy social demeanour?
8. i) What provision for work opportunities is there?
   ii) Who ensures: a) that these children are employed and b) continue to be happily and profitably occupied as adults?
   iii) Are they given any particular training for particular trades? Please elucidate.

There was a remarkable 65% response: by either letter, telephone or personal visits. Indications are that special education in the Republic of South Africa is receiving not only excellent attention now throughout the broadest spectrum of the population, of all colours, but that the FUTURE is bright because this subject is under constant scrutiny, particularly by the majority of universities and education departments. That there are South African delegates from education departments, universities and private schools, shows that this great Congress will act as an impetus to our already concerned educators in my beloved country.

It would appear that there is, however, a diversion of definition as to what constitutes "special education". While the department of National Education clarifies special education as implying those who are physically handicapped, i.e. blind, deaf, crippled, cerebral palsied or epileptic, and provides facilities for such categories,

the provincial education departments consider special education to imply those physically normal children whose mental retardation results in I.Q's of 50 - 85 qualifying them for special classes in primary schools, or special high schools from age 13. Thus the physically handicapped children, white, black, coloured and Indian have excellent schools provided for them. Post-graduate training in special education for teachers is available at many universities. This matter is still further complicated by the fact that many authorities consider the learning disabled child to fall under the category "special education".

Because the field of specific learning disabilities is the newest challenge to be met in education, and because its development amongst unprejudiced education authorities promises to enrich our culture with millions of otherwise potential drop-outs who are now going to contribute positively to society because of the new handling of their problems; and because this is our own speciality, I am going to confine myself to discussing latest trends in special education in South Africa regarding the child suffering from specific learning disabilities and our own approach at the Rebeeca Ostrowiak School at Germiston.

In 1969 the Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Children with Minimal Brain Dysfunction was commissioned by the Minister of National Education as the Murray Report. This report has had a profound effect on South African education, and I therefore quote its definition of children with minimal brain dysfunction:

> " Children with minimal brain dysfunction have average or above-average intellectual ability, their motor function, vision, hearing and emotional adjustment are adequate, but they manifest specific learning disabilities or behaviour disabilities which

are associated with deviations of the function of the central nervous system. Dysfunction of the central nervious system manifests itself in different ways and in various combinations of the (following) deviations.....: impairment, of perception, conceptualisation, language, memory, control of attention, impulse and motor function."

The Murray Report continues later:

" It is clear that the difficulties of the majority of the children with minimal brain dysfunction can be alleviated, provided that they are given assistance in time and within the framework of their class activities. We call them Group A. A second group, "Group B", will have learning difficulties of a more serious nature, they will have to be removed from school temporarily and placed in specialised schools for children with learning disabilities (NOT special schools for the subnormal) for a period of full-time assistance in their difficulties. They will be able to return to the ordinary schools. The duration of the "period of full-time assistance" will vary from child to child, but it is expected that in cases where the problem is not so complex, the children will be able to return after a term or longer, perhaps for as long as two years before they are ready to return to the ordinary school. A third group of children (Group C) will never be able to benefit sufficiently by the specialised programme, and for the rest of their school career they will have to remain in a school where the educational methods are suited to their particular needs."

Much has been done to implement this suggestion, although, as with any new science, there is controversy. The University of the Witwatersrand does not believe in taking

children out of their normal environment, while the Indian University of Durban-Westville promotes failed Grade I children to a "pseudo" Grade II. There, for six months, children receive special help, and then transfer to the ordinary Grade II.

In 1975, the Transvaal Education Department, commenced with three remedial classes, which they named "AID" classes. The conditions for these are: they must have only eight children; they must have a special classroom within the ordinary school building; the teacher must have special training. Teachers in aid classes must have had three years practical teaching experience before they may be recommended for special training by the principal and school inspector. They may then apply for the two-year course on specialising in educating the minimal brain dysfunction child at the College for Further Training. They must already be enrolled at this College before they can commence in the aid classes. From this year these special teachers will have permanent postings. Children in aid classes must leave at the age of 9, at the standard 1 level, and cannot remain longer than two years. If, after two years, they have not benefited from the aid class, they are referred to the Department of National Education, who then becomes responsible for them. There are now close on 120 aid classes in the Transvaal, and it is envisaged that eventually there willbe hundreds of aid classes throughout the Province. While this is a positive step forward, we personally have found that when aid children return to their normal classes of 30 - 40 pupils, they often flounder and would urge that there should be a transition period of one year in which aid graduates return to the aid class periodically until their adjustment to normal is complete.

In Natal, there are two full-time state remedial schools for whites, where children stay from six months to two years and in the Orange Free State any school with over 300 pupils is entitled to a full-time remedial teacher. Apart from this, all provincial education departments have school clinics staffed by orthodidacticians, orthopedagogues, socio-pedagogues, speech therapists and occupational therapists enabling children to be helped on a part-time basis. In this context my mother Rebecca Ostrowiak recommended to the National Education Congress at Natal University in 1960 that suitable "Teachers Friends" should be appointed to all schools thus anticipating the Murray Report by 9 years.

The Administration of Coloured Affairs provides adaptation classes for slow learners and retarded pupils, as well as school clinics for learning disabled and pilot schemes for diagnostic remedial teaching.

The Department of Education and Training (formerly Bantu Education) has a pilot scheme of remedial classes for learning disabled in the initial stages. Incidentally, all special education for black children is free.

The Department of Indian Affairs also has school clinics run by its Education Division, and the Indian University of Durban-Westville operates a clinic with the premise, with which I heartily agree, that "NO CHILD IS INEDUCABLE". Adaptation classes for learning disabled children often enable them to be returned to normal classes. The Indian Education Department intends, in the Future, to establish diagnostic and theraputic clinics to help learning disabled children, and to establish remedial classes in all schools. This picture is a vast improvement on what I reported to the Orton Society's First World Congress on Dyslexia in November 1974. It is wonderful to realise that even notoriously

slow-moving state machinations could have achieved so much in less than four years. The one great indictment is that, training colleges for teachers of primary pupils still do not provide training for remedial teachers, (leaving this to the Universities) but only refer in their curriculum to learning disabilities generally. I feel that if training colleges made it mandatory for all students to learn (a) how to teach reading and (b) how to identify and remediate, the future would be still brighter.

As regards our own school, the Rebecca Ostrowiak School of Reading, our motto is "Reading is Living". We teach reading in its broadest implications to pupils from age 6 to matric level. White, functionally illiterate adults, often graduates from special schools for the mentally subnormal, are taught in the evenings. All pupils, regardless of age, commence with our basic text books, "Teach Any Child to Read". These consist of five teaching guides and five supplementary work books. The method was evolved over thirty years of practical research by my mother, Rebecca Ostrowiak, when practising as an educational consultant, remediating children and adults of all ages and all mentalities, from mongoloid to super-intelligent. Over the years she developed a unique approach, which was a combination of alphabetic, perceptual, phonic and global, teaching simultaneously and painlessly reading, writing, spelling, comprehension and memory training. The greatest advantage of the books is their simplicity, and evident self-testing pattern. So much so, that pupils who before were totally illiterate, can, after completing the course, immediately follow the instructions in the Teaching Guides to teach others. The advantage of this is two-fold: the pupil revises and gains more confidence whilst passing on that most precious of gifts: reading. This multi-sensory approach to the teaching of reading was

officially experimented with at the Rotunda Park Special School in 1971. The children participating in the experiment had been diagnosed as sub-normal. They received one hours' tuition daily for just over a month. School psychologists had tested them before and after the experiment, and school marks before and after were also compared. Not only was there an overall improvement of 47%, but the principal remarked on their different approach to themselves, their school and teachers, and I quote, "There was a vast difference in their attitude and sense of responsibility towards the future and they displayed great confidence."

Since then, these books, "Teach Any Child to Read", have been approved for remedial reading in primary and high schools by the Transvaal Education Department, they are being used by special schools for the mentally retarded in the Orange Free State, and in school clinics in the Cape of Good Hope.

We deliberately named the books "Teach Any Child to Read", because, with patience and love, and following the simple instructions, any child can be taken far further than others have dared hoped.

At our own school, where we only teach pupils once a week after their normal school sessions, we have frequently had the joy of seeing children remain happily in normal schools, after having been previously recommended for special education.

Our credo is that children should be kept as normal as possible, and we work devotedly towards achieving that.

What of the future? I repeat that, like the University of Durban-Westville, we believe that no child is ineducable, and with that in mind may I list the following pointers to the Future?

1) Never give up trying to teach reading, in its fullest implications,
2) Reading, writing, spelling and correct study methods

should be systematically taught throughout primary, secondary schools and tertiary training.

3) ALL teacher training colleges should include compulsory courses on:

(a) how to teach reading

(b) the identification of specific learning disabilities

(c) possible ways to remediate within the classroom situation

(d) knowledge of when to recommend pupils for specialist help

4) Every primary and high school should have remedial teachers permanently posted to them. As my mother suggested in 1960, these teachers should see every pupil at least once a term. The accent must continually be on prevention: remediation does not always remove the scar caused by years of quiet suffering.

5) Again with the accent on prevention, it should be possible to discover which methods of teaching would be best suited to Grade I children. Just as remedial pupils are programmed for their individual needs, so should ordinary school children. For instance, we have found that the analytical, inquisitive child response most quickly to learning the full significance of the alphabet - letter names, sounds and formation simultaneously. If these children had been taught that way initially, much hardship could possibly have been avoided.

6) Parents must be actively encouraged and trained to play a more vital, intelligent, knowledgable role, whether their children are normal, physically handicapped, mentally retarded or suffering from specific learning disabilities. At our school, we invite parents into classes twice a term. At the beginning of each term, they sit at the back of the class and watch the teaching. This gives them an insight into technique, attitude, and the teachers' and pupils' difficulties, as well as giving them the opportunity to

question aspects of the work they themselves do not understand. At the end of each term, parents attend, without the pupils, a lecture-discussion on aspects of child-rearing common to most homes: discipline, developing self-confidence, jealousy, to mention a few. This has many advantages:

a) The pupils are delighted that mother and father (if he co-operates) are also learning;

b) The parents confidence and attitude improves so much that often our pupils remark that their parents are much nicer since attendance at our school.

c) The traditional antagonism between parents and teachers dissolves. Each can discuss mutual problems without feeling that criticism is implied.

7) Because of the intensely lonely shame experienced by functionally illiterate adults, and because the scope of this aspect of special education is so vast, it should be compulsory for commerce and industry to arrange for all employees who qualify to attend literacy classes, in the same way as apprentices presently have to attend tutorial sessions. These literacy classes should be under the aegis of the Department of Labour, with an Executive Committee comprised of representatives from the Departments of Health, Prisons, Education and Social Welfare. The results would be?

a) Productivity and safety would be increased

b) Negative results of adult illiteracy, such as alcoholism, drug addiction, deviant behaviour, be reduced.

c) Parents/child relationships in the context of better marriages would be improved.

In conclusion it behoves us as educationists dedicated to special education, to ensure that education is appreciated as being so "special" that it must be an ongoing process throughout life, so that in time we shall be able to say with thanksgiving, "ALL children are exceptional, and we have seen to it that they have exceptional education."

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